

Hearing set for April 12 on new transportation fee

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The last piece of Alachua County's plan to link future growth and transportation planning together with policies that push for mixed-use developments, a bus rapid transit system and bicycle/pedestrian paths moved ahead Tuesday.

At the end of a nearly 4½-hour meeting, county commissioners unanimously voted to schedule a public hearing on April 12 on the potential establishment of a new multi-modal transportation fee. If approved, this new fee would replace the current road impact fees for future development applications in the urban area of unincorporated county.

It would be the final step for the county to free itself of road concurrency requirements in those areas. Under that system, new developments have to pay a proportionate fair share toward road-widening projects that studies conclude are necessary to accommodate their traffic.

That concurrency requirement has made new development on well-traveled roadways such as Archer Road, Newberry Road and Northwest 39th Avenue cost-prohibitive and essentially put a "moratorium" on growth in those areas, said David Coffey, a land-use attorney representing three developers with projects planned along those roadways.

Should the multi-modal fee be put into place, the mixed-use, transit-oriented developments that could move ahead include Newberry Village, SpringHills, SantaFe Village and Celebration Pointe.

Commission Chairman Lee Pinkoson said his reason for moving ahead with the multi-modal fee was to allow development to move ahead along those corridors.

Critics of the county's plan, including former Gainesville City Commissioner Ed Braddy, questioned if commissioners could not achieve that same goal by simply waiting to see if the Legislature and the governor do away with concurrency this session in Tallahassee as part of an effort to reduce growth regulations.

The motion approved by commissioners Tuesday would offer discounts to developers who pay the multi-modal fee early — a 15 percent reduction at the time of development plan approval and a 7.5 percent reduction when a building permit is issued — instead of at final inspection. The new fee would also be phased in over a three-year period.

Whether the new multi-modal fee would be an increase or decrease in costs compared to the road impact fee depends on the type of development. For those transit-oriented developments, a mix of retail, residential and office development

with bus rapid transit lanes and facilities in place, the new fee would, when fully phased in, be \$1,851 for every 1,000 square feet of a residential unit.

By comparison, the current county road impact fee is \$2,073 for every 1,000 square feet of residential space.

For an exclusively residential subdivision, however, the new fee would represent an increase to \$3,164 per 1,000 square feet of residential space.

Growth Management staff argued it would still be less expensive than a road impact fee. The total projected cost for that would be \$482 million.

By comparison, the current price tag for the 20-year capital program with the multi-modal fee is approximately \$226.63 million. The majority of that money, 70 percent or \$158.64 million, would still go toward new road construction and road-widening projects. Another 26 percent, or almost \$59 million, would go toward dedicated bus rapid transit lanes, transit operations and transit capital investments such as buses, park-and-ride facilities and Gainesville Regional Transit System's planned bus maintenance facility. Four percent, or about \$9.07 million, would go toward bicycle and pedestrian paths.

County Growth Management Director Steve Lachnicht said one of the county's goals was "reduced dependency on the automobile" through the introduction of other transportation options — including tying into a bus rapid transit system planned within the city of Gainesville.

During a presentation against the plan, Braddy questioned if the county's expectation of reduced greenhouse gas emissions through the promotion of bus rapid transit was not based on unrealistic ridership numbers.

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